

**Combined Advent Bible Studies 2020 – Uniting Churches in Maroondah
Study 1: Isaiah 64: 1-9 (by Andy Tiver, North Ringwood Uniting Church)**

As a resource for individual or group bible study the ministers of the Uniting Churches in Maroondah have combined our efforts to make available this series of bible studies. Each study will take as its point of reflection one of the readings from the lections set for a particular Sunday. We hope that you find these studies a useful resource. May you observe a blessed advent.



I invite you to reflect on the painting, we will share something of its background and context in a moment but for now I invite you to be still and look.

What do you see? What feeling do you sense? What do you read off the faces of each of the figures? What of the posture? What is in the foreground? What is to be found in the background? What is the action the figures are engaged in?

What situations contemporary or historical come to mind?



Again, I invite you to reflect on the picture, we will share something of its background and context in a moment but for now I invite you to be still and look.

What do you see? What feeling do you sense? What do you read off the faces of each of the figures? What of the posture? What is in the foreground? What is to be found in the background? What is the action the figures are engaged in?

What situations contemporary or historical come to mind?

The first painting (which is in the public domain) is by Eduard Julius Friedrich Bendemann (1811-1889) a German Jewish painter and the title of the painting is *Die trauernden Juden im Exil* (Jews

Mourning in Babylonian Exile). You most likely already picked the theme and some of the tell tail elements in the painting might well have been the river, the poplar tree, the harps at their feet, the man in chains, and the look of pained sadness on the faces of the figures. It brings to mind Psalm 137

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"*

*How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land?
If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.
May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not consider Jerusalem
my highest joy.*

One of the questions that we asked was “what is the action the figures are engaged in?” which may have seemed strange because the figures appear to be doing very little. They are caught in that liminal in-between time – could we call it waiting? But it is not an optimistic waiting, they are not certain how things will turn out, they are not all smiles because they know the chains will be gone and the joy return, but neither are they totally desolate. They have hope. The present is hard, but the future is not totally closed, so they wait. Waiting can be hard desperate deeply emotional work. Waiting can be exhausting.

The second picture (used by permission) is a photograph by Florian Bachmeier of refugees waiting at a checkpoint near the Idomeni refugee camp on the Greece Macedonia border in 2016. These people are also in an in-between space, their faces are tired, yet they seem to be deep in thought, maybe reflecting on a hoped-for future.

Are there particular in-between or liminal experiences that you can recall from your own life? What emotions or feelings have accompanied such experiences? Were you hopeful? Were you optimistic? Is there a difference between hope and optimism? How would you explain it?

Optimism usually operates by focusing our attention on our own desired best outcome by censoring out and refusing to deal with the darkness of reality. Optimism paints a rosy picture of the future, but hope comes to the fore *in extremis* when it appears to be contradicted by every rule of logic. Optimism requires a certain naivety in the face of reality, hope requires an act of courage. Optimism is often self-centred “I will be ok” whereas hope speaks to a different future that is shared by all.¹

¹ These reflections on hope and optimism have been provoked by a reading of John Burnside (2019) *The Music of Time*, Profile Books, London

Read Isaiah 64:1-9 (you may also like to read it in its larger context of Isaiah 63:7-64:12)

The passage Isaiah 64:1-9 is the climax or high point of a song of collective lament, what one commentator referred to as a cry of “pain seeking understanding.” The larger song runs from Isa 63:7 to 64:12.

The historical context for this lament is some time between the Babylonian conquest and the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE and before the rebuilding of the temple in 515 BCE. Psalm 137 and the discussion we have had on the pictures above may help us in capturing something of the mood behind this song of lament. This lament reflects the in-between or liminal situation of the people. The Jerusalem Temple which had been the focal point of religious life lies in ruins (Isa 63:19): “Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation” (Isa 64:10b). This disaster struck at the very centre and foundation of religious life, yet the people have not given up on God, and their questions are deeply theological. They have seen calamity before, the people deserved the punishment, and yet God came to save the people. They can see that there is a pattern in God’s dealing with God’s people, but such a pattern cannot be taken for granted, especially now when the very centre of religious life has been destroyed and the people taken into exile away from the sacred land – Oh God where are you? Oh God why has this happened?

Read: Isa 64:1-3

What image is dominant in these verses? What are the people pleading with God to do? Is this just poetry or are the people really expecting something? What? What does it mean for God to ‘tear open the heavens and come down’? Why do the pleas of the people feel so urgent? How has this expectation been formed or shaped in the experience of the people?

The people are pleading with God that God might ‘tear open the heavens and come down’. That the distance that the people experience between their current situation of need and God’s presence might be overcome. They are asking God to replicate those ways that God has cataclysmically become present in dangerous and overwhelming ways (e.g. Judges 5:4-5; Psalm 18:7ff; Hab 3:6) in the past, for example at Sinai. They want God to become present in a show of power that will leave the surrounding nations quaking in their boots and therefore create a space of possibility for Israel.²

Do we expect God to act in ways that shake up the geo-political situation (‘make the nations tremble’) and open-up space for new possibilities to emerge? If you were to plead with God today for this to happen, what would you most hope might change? What bondages or captivities does the world most need an opportunity to escape from? In our lives at a more personal level what changes do we need most desperately in our own lives? What might become possible if things were shaken up?

Read: Isa 64:4

What is happening in this verse? What name might you give to this verse? Where do the people get their data to support this claim? Do they currently experience this to be true? Is this statement just being blindly optimistic about God or is it evidence that the people still have hope? What might be the difference? How do you understand vs 4 when it says God works for those who wait? What does it mean to wait? What is the experience of waiting like? What might the experience of waiting be like for a refugee or asylum seeker?

This verse is like a creed or a statement of faith, again like the verses that preceded, it looks back to what God has demonstrated in the past. The people are currently totally dominated by one of the most powerful empires on the planet, there is no real objective way of escape or change in their situation, yet in the midst of their difficulties they find the words for this confession of God's uniqueness and that God sides with those who "wait" for God.

Read: Isa 64:5-7

Where do the people look for the root cause of their current situation? Why would a people who have been overrun by an imperial power and forced out of their country into exile look inwardly for the source of their current predicament? What are the failings that the people identify in themselves? The failures and wrongs that are identified are imputed to all the people, as a people (as a nation) are we responsible for collective wrongs or only for what we individually do wrong? If we were to undergo a collective self-examination as a nation, how would we fair as Australians? Are their particular wrongs or transgressions that we need to own and confess as a nation?

These verses contain the analysis that the people make of their own situation, it would be easy for the people to understand their situation as a simple conquest of the weak by the strong, but their reflection goes deeper. They ask, 'what was it that made us weak and vulnerable?' and the answer they come up with is both theological and ethical. It is both interesting and surprising to examine the logic in these verses. Note verse 5b which almost appears to blame God for the people's sin "But you were angry, **and** we sinned; **because** you hid yourself, we transgressed?" Do they mean to suggest that if God had not been angry, if God had not been distant, they would not have sinned? Is it therefore God's fault? I think this passage points more to an awareness of a vicious cycle; because of the people's failings God turns away in anger, and because God turns away and the people experience God as distant their situation becomes even more dire. Maybe a term we could use to describe this predicament is 'alienation' – the people have lost touch with God and in losing touch with God they have entered into iniquitous and injustice/unrighteous relationships with each other.

Read: Isa 64:8-9

In verse 8 there is an image of the people as clay and God as a potter. What does this image suggest for you? What are the characteristics of clay? What is the work of a potter? What is the relationship between the clay and the potter? Why might this image be invoked as a step towards addressing the alienation described above?

In verse 9 there is a plea that God no longer be angry. There is a plea that 1) God no longer remember the people's iniquity and 2) God consider the people as God's own. How might these two pleas be related to the image above of the clay and the potter?

being pressed out of them, and then the potter-God begins reshaping the clay with God's image of them as God's own people in mind as he shapes and forms them anew.

Situations of desperate in-betweenness/liminality when we are forced to seek for real hope amid chaos and collapse can be life changing for individuals, communities, and nations. Times when all the dominant logic of the present system and the prevailing world view may tell us things are at a dead end, but courageous hope enables us to surrender to a divine process of new possibilities. For example, many hope that the global experience of Covid-19 might be such an opportunity and others seem more concerned to resume business as usual.

We are reflecting on this passage from Isaiah in the context of advent and in preparation for Christmas. In this context the plea for God to break open the heavens and enter our world takes on very particular form in the birth of Jesus as Emmanuel "God with us". We are also aware as a people who live after the resurrection that we also await the further in-breaking of the kingdom of God in all its fullness. We feel deep within us that sense of alienation from God and each other and we desire a deeper communion but there is so much brokenness in our individual and collective life that gets in the way.

How can we live in this in-between time in ways that open us to God's reshaping of our lives?